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ABSTRACT

While students are struggling with the basic concepts of learning a second language, they are not likely to be intrigued by the language as the key to literature. In the first two years of language study, the amount of material being studied and the focus on language acquisition are such that film can be accommodated as an outside activity carrying credit. A German series of literature on film, designed for television, and literature interpreted for the cinema by film authors offer diversity in the language classroom, are well suited for classroom use, and are readily available. A brief in-class introduction of the author, the period, and the film establishes the literary context before viewing. A discussion of students' written critiques after viewing the film serve to clarify any questions students might have. Use of English in students' critical commentary is permissible only in the first semester. Students eventually recognize that subtitles are actually a hindrance, and they soon notice the inaccuracies in them. If appropriately used at each level, film will support literature before and when it can be read, while adding its own dimension to and interpretation of the written work. (MSE)

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The Camera Angle: Film as a First Exposure to Literature

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Boston

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ABSTRACT

The Camera Angle: Film as a First Exposure to Literature

While students are struggling with the basic concepts of another language, they are not yet likely to be intrigued by it as the key to the abundant treasures of literature. This is clearly not the time for Kleist, Keller, Fontane, Musil, Grass--or is it? With film in the picture, the answer can be affirmative and the process virtually painless. Given the amount of material and the focus on language acquisition, the first two years are tightly packed and structured, and film can best be accommodated as an outside activity that carries credit.

"Filmed Literature: Great Authors Reflect on the Society of Their Era," a German series for television, and literature as interpreted for the cinema by film authors like Volker Schlöndorff, offer rich diversity and are not only admirably suited but readily available. A brief in-class introduction of the author, the period and the film establishes the literary context in advance, and a discussion of the students' written critiques afterwards clarifies remaining questions to complete the picture. The instructor's level of expectation is raised with every passing semester, and a measure of success is the improvement in critical commentary for which English is admissable only in the first year. Subtitles, initially an essential crutch, are eventually recognized as a hindrance, and students soon take pleasure in noting their inaccuracies. While these films also add a dimension to a literature class, their greatest merit seems to lie in making literature accessible to all levels.

In elaborating on the filmed literature by the authors mentioned above, the paper seeks to make a case for film as one effective means of preparing students for the reading and understanding of literature.

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The Camera Angle: Film as a First Exposure to Literature.

In our ongoing effort to find new and more effective approaches to language teaching, we frequently vary tactics as well as emphases, continuously questioning our own methods and standards. Is it of foremost importance to lay a solid structural foundation? Should almost instantaneous, albeit superficial communications skills have top priority, or should providing cultural insights by means of a variety of authentic or quasi-authentic materials come first? If there is one component most often deferred to a late stage of the teaching/learning process, it is the introduction to literature, that most difficult and least accessible manifestation of a people's culture and mentality, and one requiring a thorough grounding in the language. Even in their own language, students typically have had little experience with literature and are still wary of its complexities. A survey of literature as an introduction to advanced work in the other language may be their first serious encounter with any literature, a step for which they are inadequately prepared. If we want to encourage our students to pursue their language studies beyond a superficial understanding and mastery, we have to find ways to open doors, to incite and sustain their curiosity.

While a number of tactics to this end suggest themselves, I would like to propose film as one particularly suited for every stage, not barring the elementary level. Aware of the difficult logistics, particularly in a first year course already crowded with structure-and vocabulary acquisition, I had to devise a strategy compatible with a demanding curriculum and acceptable to most students. Billed as a mandatory extracurricular activity for all of my German classes, the actual viewing of the films is the only condition common to all of them, with the expected feedback depending on the level. The schedule of four films per semester is publicized on campus and in the community at the beginning of the academic year and incorporated into the course syllabi. The selection, apart from availability, usually depends upon the literature course I am currently teaching. Any additional films I may choose for such a course are also made available to students in other classes. Depending on the anticipated difficulties, I either introduce the film in lower division classes in advance or merely to the whole audience on the night of the showing, particularly with reference to its author and period in literature and its filmic transformation.

Advanced language students are quick to realize the inadequacies of subtitles, but for the beginning ones the lack of a faithful representation of dialogue is

perhaps the most serious flaw in this type of introduction to literature. Partial recompense is made through the mostly superb acting, authentic setting, and some initial familiarity with the work. It is by subtitles, on the other hand, that students come to measure their progress, and it is an important and satisfying discovery, particularly for beginners, that comprehension increases from one film to the next, thus decreasing the reliance on subtitles. But besides the initial language barrier, there are other difficulties to overcome, not the least of which is expectation. In the students' experience, cinema is largely synonymous with entertainment while German film in general does not meet that criterion. Humor, when it appears, is also baffling and often hard to accept as such. The critiques--which only first year students may write in English--uncover much other-cultural confusion standing in the way of comprehension and acceptance. The follow-up discussions are therefore the most beneficial part of the experience. Not all the films presented meet with the same degree of enthusiasm or even approval. After all, Gottfried Keller and Günter Grass are lightyears apart. Even individal reactions to the same film range far among students on the same level, often from, 'this is the best I have ever...' to 'This is the worst and most depressing ever...' Many negative reactions are based on misunderstandings, and some discussion of the literary work the film portrays is needed to establish a frame of reference. For those who will eventually become students of German literature the benefits of such an early introduction are obvious, but even for those who will not, a dimension has been added to their second language and culture experience. Having stated my case, I will discuss in the following some of the films I have presented, their reception and my view of their usefulness.

Heinrich von Kleist's Marquise von O... becomes particularly memorable through Erich Roemer's excellent film and fortunate choice of Edith Clever and Bruno Ganz as his protagonists. The Novelle, published in 1810, claims to be based on an actual, sensational occurence made public in newspapers in Northern Italy. The Marquise von O..., unaware of how she became pregnant, asks the father of her unborn child to come forward and identify himself because she is determined to marry him. Kleist's Novelle opens with this remarkable notice, followed by flashbacks. The film, on the other hand, follows the actual chronology. A fortress commanded by the widowed Marquise's father is attacked and taken by Russian troops. A young officer, Graf F., rescues the lady from a horde of plundering soldiers, whereupon she loses consciousness. A short time later, after he had been reported dead, the count returns to the Marquise's family to

ask her father for her hand in marriage. Torn between gratitude and her earlier resolve never to marry again, she decides to turn him down. Not long thereafter, the Marquise learns that she is pregnant. Uncomprehending and bewildered she is not prepared for her parents' rejection, their ready willingness to believe her an accomplished liar. She is made to leave but defies her parents by insisting on taking her children with her. When the Marquise's mother, through a ruse, is able to establish her daughter's innocence, the family is tearfully reunited, the count responds to the newspaper notice, and the marriage takes place, though at first in name only. Students, unaccustomed to the profuse, unabashed display of emotions, especially on the part of men of an earlier age, find some of the scenes, particularly between the reunited father and daughter, quite extreme and close to ridiculous. However, they note positively the strength and integrity of Kleist's--and Roemer's--female characters in juxtaposition to the weak and less than admirable males. Students of literature, moreover, appreciate the fact that the spirit and language live on in the filmmaker's production.

We continue in the same century with the perhaps best known and most popular of Gottfried Kellers Die Leute von Seldwyla stories, Kleider machen Leute, made into a film by Helmut Käutner in 1940. The Swiss petit bourgois milieu of Keller's own origin is portrayed in the ficticious small towns of Seldwyla and Goldach and their comfortable, self-satisfied citizens. A poor, hungry, unemployed young tailor unwittingly becomes a mysterious prominent figure courted by the important people of Goldach, not because of demonstrated ability or achievement but because of his noble, elegant appearance, created by his own needle. The Novelle exploits this theme of Sein versus Schein on several levels as it uncovers, with gentle, and at times, not so gentle humor, the weaknesses and pettiness of this smugly virtuous society. The film, starring the noted comic actor Heinz Rühmann as an endearing, bumbling Graf Wenzel Strapinski, is faithful to the original literary text and serves as an excellent example of German Romantic Realism in its Swiss manifestation. The students enjoy this film and appreciate the happy ending as well as the representation of mid-19th century architecture, dress and manners. They are usually less aware of the social satire, and this gives rise to a discussion of Swiss self-consciousness and self-irony as it is found even in its contemporary authors like Frisch and Dürrenmatt. This is also an opportunity to point out to students that literature is not identified by nationality but by language.

For filmed literature before 1945 I chose Heinrich Mann and Bertolt Brecht, with Professor Unrat and Dreigroschenoper. Josef von Sternberg's Film, Der blaue Engel, produced both in German and in English in 1929/30, and based on Heinrich Mann's Professor Unrat, became a world-wide success. The film script had several authors, among them Carl Zuckmayer, who, with Mann's permission, transformed the original novel as well as the main character. Not the confrontation between Rat and the city but the figure of professor Rat himself is central to the film. Mann's ill-tempered classroom tyrant with malice toward one and all deserves to be called Unrat while Sternberg's protagonist evokes compassion in the end. He is still the caricature of the authoritarian teacher but his loneliness and unworldliness make him human and vulnerable, allowing a tragic rather than a farcical ending. This satire of the Wilhelminian bourgeoisie affords historical as well as literary insights, aside from fascinating filmic innovations and the discovery of Marlene Dietrich. However, one has to point out to students accustomed to state-of-the-art cinema Sternberg's artistic use of sound and silence in a picture made 60 years ago.

Not all filmmakers achieve a meeting of minds with the author of a literary work, but few have had such serious disagreement as director G.W. Pabst with Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill over the Dreigroschenoper. Pabst was convinced that a novel or a play, while the original material, should merely provide the framework for the film, with an emphasis on creation rather than adaptation. He favored smooth continuity and focused on characters and the sentiments that united them. Brecht's approach was analytical, breaking up the play into brief segments, interspersed with Weill's songs, while Pabst did not want the music to interrupt the action. The argument culminated in a suit against Pabst and the film company, later dropped by Weill and lost by Brecht. Students are usually familiar with the famous Mackie Messer song without knowing the context or having read Dreigroschenoper. The place is an imaginary London, the time the late 19th century, and the social strata an underworld of criminals, beggars and corrupt guardians of law and order, represented by Mackie, the leader of a gang of criminals, Peachum, the king of the beggars, and Tiger Brown, the not so exemplary police commisioner. When Mackie meets Peachum's daughter Polly, he decides to forsake his mistress Jenny, inhabitant of a brothel, to marry Polly. The eleborate preparations for a sumptuous wedding feast in a deserted underground warehouse are a parody of societal customs which is carried out at the expense of bourgeois society when the most elegant shops in London are

plundered for the requisite trappings. Tiger Brown is the guest of honor but Peachum, furious over the marriage, threatens with a beggars' demonstration to disrupt the impending queen's coronation if Mackie is not sent up to the gallows. Mackie hides in the brothel but is captured when Jenny turns informer. Polly, meanwhile, shows great enterprise and opens up a bank, on the premise that lawful robbery pays off better than illegal activities. The beggars' demonstration causes the downfall of Tiger Brown and Peachum, but Mackie, escaped from prison, admits them as partners in Polly's bank, and three new respectable pillars of society are born. G.W. Pabst who directed the making of the film in a French and a German version in 1931, felt an affinity to Brecht's work and the author's social and political views. Pabst, born in Austria, began to pursue an acting career that eventually took him to the Deutsche Volkstheater in New York. He returned after four years and spent WWI in France as an enemy alien. Back in Austria he became fascinated with film and recognized for his realistic portrayal of a corrupt contemporary society in his 1925 silent film, Die freudlose Gasse, Joyless Street. Both he and his star, Greta Garbo, received international attention. As in this instance, the history of the film as well as the history and society of an era depicted may be as informative as reading the play. It may also stimulate curiosity about an author who has long been controversial in German literature.

I will conclude my examination with two contemporary authors, Peter Handke and Günter Grass. In the case of Peter Handke's Die linkshändige Frau, the film script preceded the novel. However, the novel was published before the film was actually made from the original screen play. Edith Clever and Bruno Ganz whom we saw in Die Marquise von O... play the couple, but it is she who dominates the film and appears in virtually every scene. She does not speak during the first fifteen minutes of the film, and her first words are a voice-over. When she finally addresses her husband who has just returned from a business trip to Finnland and spent the night with her alone in a hotel, it is to ask him to leave her and their child. The title has no literal application, it only indicates some difference from the usual. Alone, Marianne is seen taking long, solitary walks during the three months covered by the film, March, April and May. The place is Clamart, a Paris susurb where Handke himself lived at one time. She spends time with her son, encounters friends, but her being is solitary. Handke is known for his skepticism concerning the ability of language to communicate. In his writings, he sometimes even uses line drawings in lieu

of words, although his readers immediately translate them back into words. In linkshändige Frau, silences often signify more than speech. Such obvious symbols as the rue de raison on which Marianne lives, the playing of Beethoven's für Elise as she walks down the rue Élise, and the frequent passing of trains, always moving away from her are Handke's humor about symbolism. It has been suggested that the film is about translation: film into literature, French into German (Marianne and her husband are Germans living in France), the husbands early remark that he had no one to talk to in Finnland, women's versus men's consciousness, and Marianne's work as a literary translator, translating Flaubert's A Simple Heart and finishing it just before the film ends. Without explanation, this film made by the author himself, is as difficult for students as is most of Handke. I have viewed and read with a literature class Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter and found it no easy task. I have not attempted the novel, Die linkshändige Frau, which is almost without adjectives and adverbs, or attributions of thoughts and feelings, but I still consider this film by one of the foremost contemporary Austrian writers a good introduction to that segment of German literature.

One of the less accessible though most widely known works of contemporary German literature is perhaps Die Blechtrommel, by Günter Grass. Not only the sheer volume but Grass' treatment of that infamous period in German history, as well as the author's unorthodox style make reading it a formidable task for students. The novel has been controversial from the moment of its publication in 1959 and, twenty years later, Volker Schlöndorff's film enjoyed the same notoriety. Especially because of its difficulty as undergraduate reading, the film can serve as a valuable substitute for all levels. Its reception covers the widest possible range, thus requiring much discussion and explanation. Hans Magnus Enzensberger's observation that the novel is violent because it touches everything as if it were touchable seems to get at the root of many negative feelings expressed by students who are at once riveted and repelled.

Oskar Matzerath, narrator, drummer and main character, decides on his third birthday to stop growing. It is a world view from his frog perspective that dominates the first two parts of the novel as well the entire film. It reveals all the otherwise hidden hypocracy and corruption of the adult world Oskar has rejected. He is, however, far from being an uninvolved spectator. He fights perceived evil with evil and becomes his family's judge and executioner as he causes tragedy upon tragedy. The success of the film is largely due to

Schlöndorff's discovery of a suitable Oskar. He had eliminated the possibility of using a dwarf. When he found twelve year old David Benent who was the size of a four-year-old, he knew he had his Oskar, and he was particularly struck by the child's compelling eyes. Moreover, david's ability to absorb the novel which was read to him several times, and his lack of inhibition before the camera which made him the perfect personification of his character. As in his 1966 film, Der junge törless, based on Robert Musils novel, Schlöndorff set out to reduce a complex literary text to a straight forward narrative. As he explains in his, Die Blechtrommel. Tagebuch einer Verfilmung, "A book is one thing, a film another. With the transition into another medium comes a change in the material...for me, film is a realistic medium...to film realistically means to make dense, to abstract, and even to manufacture a certain artificiality--a film reality." Grass who had rejected all previous film proposals concurred with Schlöndorff's interpretation of his work, but it is well to explain the difference to the students.

Other films I have used with success include, Der junge Törless, Effi Briest, Der Schimmelreiter, Grete Minde, and Drei Wege zum See. In order to provide a worth-while experience, I am as mindful of the quality of the filmmaker as of the work of literature.

Aside from an early introduction to the literature of their chosen other language, the students who view and critique the films receive an authentic, unadulterated product of the other culture, unlike most books, videos and other tools prepared specifically for them. If used appropriately on each level, film will support literature before and when it can be read, while adding its own dimension and interpretation of the written work.